DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 162 303 CS 204 323

AUTHOR Stanley, Julia Penelope
TITLE The Sexist Tradition: Words and Meaning.
PUB DATE Nov 77
NOTE 20p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the National Council of Teachers of English (67th, New York City, November 24-26, 1977)

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.83 HC-$1.67 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Elementary Secondary Education; *English; English Instruction; *Females; Higher Education; Language Arts; *Language Attitudes; Language Usage; Linguistics; *Semantics; *Sex Discrimination; Sex Role; *Sex Stereotypes; Social Attitudes

ABSTRACT

Because of the built-in stereotyping and derogation of women that exists in the English language, the classroom teacher must face the task of finding practical answers to three popular attacks against research on sexism in English: language is a rather minor and irrelevant issue; there is no need to change language from the way it has always been; and words have meaning only in context or usage, so sexism is not in language but rather in people. In response to the first attack, research reveals that far from being trivial, language is the vehicle that expresses attitudes and influences thinking. When sexist attitudes structure English, male power is reinforced and women are repressed. Likewise, a historical perspective reveals that language changes constantly and, more significantly, the use of male-specific pronouns as the pronoun of reference for both sexes occurred deliberately as an act of the British Parliament in 1850. Although the third attack, placing the meaning of words according to the speaker's intention, is impossible to measure accurately, numerous words in the English language illustrate that masculine words or forms are positive in meaning or connotation, while feminine words and phrases indicate weakness or negative implications. (HAI)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, EDUCATION & WELFARE
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION

THIS DOCUMENT HAS BEEN REPRODUCED EXACTLY AS RECEIVED FROM THE PERSON OR ORGANIZATION ORIGINATING IT. POINTS OF VIEW OR OPINIONS STATED DO NOT NECESSARILY REPRESENT OFFICIAL NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION POSITION OR POLICY

ED162303

The Sexist Tradition: Words and Meaning*

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

Julia Penelope Stanley

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC) AND USERS OF THE ERIC SYSTEM."

Julia Penelope Stanley
Department of English
University of Nebraska
Lincoln, Nebraska 68588

*Revised version of a paper given at the National Council of Teachers of English annual convention, New York City, November, 1977.

CS 204 323

When Lee Gershuny asked me to speak on this panel earlier this year, I said "Of course," thinking that my topic was fairly obvious and clear-cut. Two events yesterday convinced me that my initial judgment was overly-optimistic, if not downright naïve. (You'd think I'd learn after all these years.) Yesterday morning, in the meeting of the NCTE Board of Directors, I had to sit and listen to Charlotte Brooks allowing herself to be addressed as "Madame Chairman." Later in the afternoon, I dropped in on the open session of the Women's Committee to find out what they were doing. To my surprise, we were visited by an older boy who jovially informed us that he thought we'd like to have a male chauvinist point of view--this, after 7,000 years of that and nothing else! In the next hour or so he proceeded to offer up the stale, tiresome opinions that pass for thinking in some quarters, cloaked, of course, as a "reasonable" point of view. Well, I <u>did</u> learn something from those two scenarios: People can be very stupid when they put their minds to it, and I found myself thinking, <u>how many</u> times do we have to say the same thing? Especially when the people who should be listening don't want to listen.

When I prepare myself to speak at NCTE, I assume that I'm talking to an audience aware of the power of the English language in its many uses. But too much has happened in the past two days that indicates exactly the opposite from what I assume. The surge of research interest in the relationship between the English language and sexist cultural attitudes has exposed a number of problems for linguistic theory and has challenged our understanding of what language structure is. Although some are uncomfortable

with the implications of research on sexism as it is manifested in language, I think the challenge to our conceptions is healthy and long overdue. Those of us who've done a lot of this research (three of us are on this panel) are now exploring those implications, and I'd hoped to share with you some of the work that I'm currently engaged in. Instead, I will discuss some of the work done on words and meaning by Gershuny, Nilsen, Schulz, and myself (some of it in collaboration with Susan W. Robbins), in the context of the three most frequently used tactics for denying the validity of the research on sexism in English. I do this with the intention of raising some crucial practical and political questions for classroom teachers of English. If English teachers will not challenge the language as it is now being taught in our schools, who will?

There are three popular attacks against the research on sexism in English used by the willfully ignorant:

(1) Language is, after all, a rather minor and irrelevant issue. Surely there are more important social problems with which we should be concerned.

(2) "You people" are trying to change the language. This is the way it's always been.

(3) Words have meaning <u>only</u> in context, that is, in usage, so you can't say that sexism is <u>in</u> language; it's in people. Ergo: Efforts to change English are doomed to failure, unless you change their attitudes first. (Corollary: Since we don't intend to change our attitudes, you may as well not bother.)

Now, these three pseudo-arguments are incredibly naïve when they come from laypeople, since we haven't been successful in teaching them anything about their language (or they haven't been listening--the effect is the same). When they come from English teachers, I despair. Furthermore, to hear such ignorance from people in an organization that has published its own guidelines on non-sexist uses of English and a book, Sexism and Language, co-edited by members of this panel, can only mean that no one is listening, that no one wants to listen. After all, how many times do we have to point out the obvious? How many times must we repeat ourselves until we get tired of the sound of our own voices? (Believe it or not, I get tired of talking about "sexism in English," but I won't shut up until I see large-scale commitment to changing the language.) And so, once more with feeling, let me review for you some of the research on words and meaning.

The first objection to our research asserts that the issue of sexism in language is trivial, irrelevant, unimportant, even if it's true that there is sexism in English. Now, this objection, like the other two, grants that the evidence is incontrovertible, as, indeed, it is. This is, however, a strange position for folks like the editors of the New York Times, L. E. Sissman, Edwin Newman, and John Ciardi, to name a few names. But how much stranger it is to hear English teachers maintaining that language is trivial and irrelevant, when we have dedicated our lives to teaching good writing (however inadequately) and the intelligent reading of literature. Why do we teach writing and literature if language is trivial? Neither would exist if language were irrelevant. Do we believe that the subject matter of our discipline is irrelevant? Are we irrelevant, as some have claimed?

If you are willing to grant that language and literature are important, why is it irrelevant that wimmin are called "girls" until we die? Why is it irrelevant that female address terms (Miss, Mrs.) serve to indicate whether or not a womon is sexually available ("on the market") while the male Mr. does not? Why is it irrelevant that 99% of written and spoken English still has the pseudo-generic he, man, mankind, chairman, etc., when we know that they don't include wimmin? Why is it irrelevant that an "uppity" womon can still be shut up when she's called "slut," "Lesbian," "unfeminine," "castrating bitch," etc.? If language is trivial, where do such words get their tremendous power over our lives? (One might assert that "it's all in my mind," but so is most language-related activity.) I would suggest that those who maintain that language is a trivial issue are, in fact, afraid. I would suggest that arguments from triviality demonstrate that the tremendous resistance to recognizing and dealing with sexist structures in the language has its origins in the desire to maintain male power. Our challenge to male power begins with our exposure of the ways we have been socialized and controlled by male uses of language. Far from being trivial, research that reveals the ways in which sexist attitudes structure English and, thereby, our thinking, is of fundamental importance, for we will free the thinking of 53% of the population of the U. S. Set free from the categories and structures of patriarchal language, wimmin will be free to imagine new lives for themselves. Is that a small thing?

In our efforts to reveal the insidious ways in which language affects our thinking, we are accused of trying to "change" the language, as though this were not a "good" thing. This attack has many guises; I will give you

only one. When I interviewed for my job at the University of Nebraska, one of the males in the department said I was a "prescriptive" grammarian because I am trying to "freeze" and "purify" the language. Now, this was obviously an attempt to discredit me as a linguist. What self-respecting linguist, besides Chomsky, would align herself with the traditional grammarians? The essence of this attack assumes that if the structure of English is sexist, that it has always been sexist, and that we're trying to destroy this "structure" that has "withstood the test of time." So be it, if one would have it so. But the argument from tradition (or "inherent structure") is not based on evidence. This attack, too, is based on willful ignorance about English. We all know that language does change. However, too many wish to believe that language change is the result of obscure, haphazard processes over which individuals have little or no control, of which we are "unconscious." Such people would have us believe that language change and social change are isolated and unrelated processes. Do I need to remind you of the Norman Invasion of 1066 or the Scandanavian incursions of the 8th and 9th centuries? Did those political events alter the development of English? English has never been the same. (How one judges these effects to be "good" or "bad" is, of course, quite another matter.) I will give you two instances of "sexist" change in English that were socially motivated.

The first occurred around the 12th century (Stanley and Robbins, to appear), when some speakers of English borrowed the pronoun sche (represented orthographically in a variety of ways) from some as yet unknown sources (I've heard that one linguist has asserted that sche was borrowed from Turkish during the Crusades, but have seen no evidence for this yet.) As a result of

similar phonological changes in other areas of English, the two sex-specific personal pronouns, he and heo, were becoming homophonous. If this sound-change had been completed, and we had only one third person pronoun in Modern English, then he would, in fact, be generic. But that did not happen, and sche, a maximally distinctive form, became the female-specific pronoun, while he remained the male-specific pronoun. The second change involves he and it was legislated by an Act of Parliament in 1850. (For the Act itself and discussions of it see Evans and Evans, 1957, and Ann Bodine, 1975.) This Act established he as the "official" pronoun of reference for both sexes in all parliamentary language on the grounds that phrases such as "he or she" were too cumbersome and that the male pronoun also included the female.

We can learn something from these two examples, especially the legislated change. It took approximately 50 years for people to believe that he was a "generic" in English, and 20 more for them to believe that it "had always been that way." We can legislate language change, in only 50 years. Are we trying to change the "structure" of English? If so, whose structure are we trying to change? Clearly, it's a structure that's been tampered with so many times that one more change can't be all that devastating in its implications. Then why the resistance to such change? It's a question of interest. English has been changed in the past to serve male control, and this time we're trying to change it to increase the visibility of wimmin in all areas of life. Therein lies the real source of the conflict.

The third attack on research on sexism in English alleges that words don't "mean" anything in and of themselves, that words have meaning only in their social context and vary according to the speaker's intentions, a variable impossible to measure accurately. If this allegation were true,

of course, we could forget research in semantics. This charge has been brought to bear upon my research on terms for prostitutes, e.g., slut, whore, honey pot, broad. I found 220 terms for sexually "promiscuous" wimmin (1977). (Later Muriel Schulz (1975) reported that she had found another 100.) As a result of that research, I discovered that the parameters of that semantic field (that is, the boundaries of the set that determine their use in a specific situation) were COST and LENGTH OF CONTACT. (Since then, Terry Willis, a student of mine, has suggested a third parameter, AVAILABILITY, but I haven't yet explored the possibility of a three-dimensional field for the set.) But, it is argued, words like broad and honey pot can be intended "affectionately" by a male, used as "terms of endearment." That may be the case, but "intention" is not a major concern in semantics, and to focus on such questions is a diversionary tactic. In semantic studies, one must ask the question, "Why does English have so many derogatory words for wimmin's sexuality and only 20 words (that are not pejorative) for males?" When we are concerned with the structure of any language, we are not bothered by idiosyncratic usages that may vary from person to person. In this case, we are looking at the structure of the vocabulary: What terms exist in the language? How many are there (in the set)? Which terms do not exist?

Susan W. Robbins and I asked exactly these questions when we investigated sex-marked predicates in English (1977). In the course of that research we found general patterns that held for both male-specific and female-specific predicates, but we also found consistent asymmetries in that system. For example, most of the predicates that refer to sexual arousal and related activities are primarily masculine, e.g., get a hard on, ejaculate,

inseminate, impregnate, have blue balls. There is a full vocabulary to cover the range of states experienced by males, but there is no parallel vocabulary for the sexual experience of wimmin. In contrast, there is an extensive set of vocabulary items that describe the activities of wimmin after they have conceived, e.g., become pregnant, give birth, bear a child, to be delivered of a child, have an abortion. (as an aside, it should be noted that terms from both sex-specific categories have been metaphorically extended to refer to intellectual activities.)

Given that vocabulary (or the lack of one) is an index of those activities regarded as valuable by our culture, what does this have to do with "meaning"? At its most "trivial" level, the vocabulary provided by our culture limits severely the kinds of experience we can express for ourselves. It is not enough to say that the observed asymmetry in certain portions of the sex-marked predicates is the result of some "real-world" conditions, that the terms for wimmin's "sexuality" are restricted to events connected with bearing children because men don't bear children, or that the vocabulary for male sexuality is extensive because males have a limited role in the production of children. If one appeals to this "real world," it is clear that wimmin do have sexual experiences for which there is no vocabulary, and that males do participate (sometimes) in child-rearing. Obviously, there are areas of our individual lives for which we have no culturally-given terms. This asymmetry extends itself into the syntax of our language and its effects can be observed in the verbs mother and father. The following pairs of sentences illustrate the ways in which this semantic asymmetry determines co-occurrence possibilities.

1. a. She has been mothering her children for years.
   b. ?He has been fathering his children for years.

2. a. She has frequently mothered her children.
   b. ?He has frequently fathered his children.

3. a. She has always mothered her children.
   b. ?He has always fathered his children.

4. a. She has not mothered his children for years.
   b. ?He has not fathered his children for years.

5. a. She has hardly mothered her children.
   b. ?He has hardly fathered his children.

From these examples, it becomes clear that where one predicate, mother, can easily occur with durative adverbs (for years, frequently, always) and negative preverbal adverbs (hardly), the "parellel" verb, father, in the same syntactic environments, results in sentences that are at least anomalous, if not ungrammatical. That these two verbs, which one might imagine to be "equal" in their syntactic co-occurrence, do not have the same semantic range is especially significant in sentences 4a. and b. In 4a., the negation of mother asserts that she failed to "nurture" her children, not that she didn't give birth to them, whereas 4b., in its grammatical sense, asserts that he was not the biological father. The aspect of nurturing implied by the term mother but not by father accounts for the asymmetrical syntactic distribution illustrated in the other pairs of sentences. Since nurturing in our culture is a process extended over a period of time, mother can occur with durative

and negative preverbal adverbs. The sexual act which results in "parenting," however, is a one-time event; thus, father is conceived to be a temporally-restricted activity. The restricted range of father is further exemplified in the sentences below.

6. a. She mothered her sister.
   b. He fathered his sister.

7. a. She mothered her grandmother.
   b. *He fathered his grandmother.

8. a. She mothered her parakeet.
   b. *He fathered his parakeet.

The pairs of sentences in 6-8 show that father is limited to its biological sense. Example 6b. implies that incest was committed, but 6a. does not carry this implication at all. I've marked 7b. and 8b. as ungrammatical because they don't occur, and their lack of acceptability is due to the limited biological reference of father. I won't belabor my point. Clearly, English exhibits semantic and syntactic asymmetries in the reference of two verbs that we might expect to be parallel in their function as kinship terms, and their distribution in the cited pairs of sentences tells us something about "meaning" and the structure of English.

For the sake of clarity, let me return to my previous question in a more specific way. What do we mean when we talk about "words and meaning"? Where does "meaning" exist? In single words? In groups of words? In dictionary definitions? In context only? In our heads? Or is "meaning" a

result of language structure? I would suggest that "meaning," or pieces of it, are to be found in all of those places, and four different kinds of research on sexism in English support my conclusion.

First, "meaning" is too nebulous a word to be very illuminating. It covers too many different aspects of using and understanding language, and I think that meaning is a consequence of usage and is thereby bound to immediate context. In contrast, if we are talking about the structure of a language, then we are talking about semantics. In order to make this distinction clear, consider two more pairs of words, feminine and masculine, and womanly and manly. These terms are defined as follows by the Random House Dictionary:

> feminine -- 1. pertaining to a woman or girl: feminine beauty, feminine dress. 2. like a woman; weak; gentle.
>
> masculine -- 1. having the qualities or characteristics of a man; manly, virile; strong; bold: a deep masculine voice. 2. pertaining to or characteristic of a man or men: masculine attire.
>
> womanly -- like or befitting a woman; feminine; not masculine or girlish. syn.--womanly implies resemblance in appropriate, fitting ways: womanly decorum, modesty. Womanlike, a neutral synonym, may suggest mild disapproval or, more rarely, disgust: Womanlike she (he) burst into tears. Womanish usually implies an inappropriate resemblance and suggests weakness or effeminacy: womanish petulance.

> manly -- having the qualities usually considered desirable in a man; strong; brave; honorable; resolute; virile. syn.--Manly implies possession of the most valuable or desirable qualities a man can have, as dignity, honesty, directness, etc., in opposition to servility, insincerity, underhandedness, etc. It also connotes strength, courage, and fortitude:. . .

There is much I could say about these "definitions" specifically, but most of it seems fairly obvious: the differences in language in them, the kinds of examples chosen by the editors (or not chosen, as the case may be), the implication in the definition of manly that wimmin are "servile," "insincere," and "underhanded," the fact that while we get a long list of behavioral adjectives for the word manly, the editors deemed it sufficient to define womanly by setting it in opposition to masculine and girlish, the fact that all four of these terms are defined in terms of each other. But such observations attend only to the symptomatic features of these adjectives. Their importance for semantic analysis lies in their existence. To the extent that such adjectives can be said 'to refer,' they 'refer' only to the social system of stereotypical behaviors assigned to people on the basis of sex; their only "meaning" is the attribution of culturally-defined behaviors. In terms of the semantic structure of English, we may observe that we have a self-contained set of adjectives (which would include womanish, mannish, effeminate) that exists merely for the attribution of specific types of behavior on the basis of sex.

Such evidence from the vocabulary of English indicates that "meaning" is a culturally-conditioned characteristic of certain classes of words. From the evidence amassed by both Gershuny and Nilsen, it would appear that the function of dictionary-makers is exactly what they have claimed it is, the perpetuation of cultural meanings. Dictionary definitions, then, are simply the more-or-less accurate recording of the range of uses a specific word may have. Nilsen (1973) went through a dictionary and found those dictionary entries that are sex-specific in their definitions. For example, the definition for salesman is 'a man employed to sell merchandise,' and it is male-specific; the definition for hag is 'an ugly, frightful old woman,' and it is female-specific. The definition for president, however, is sex-neutral: 'one appointed or elected to preside over an organized body of people, ...' (All quotations from the American Heritage Dictionary.) Nilsen's examination of such definitions forces us to ask questions about what words "mean," what is a "definition," how do we understand word "meanings," and where do dictionary definitions come from? Gershuny's work (1974; 1975) on the ways in which the illustrative examples in the Random House Dictionary reflect the sexist attitudes of the culture raises some of the same questions.

Partial answers to some of these questions are offered by my own work on gender and generics (1975; 1977; 1978) and Muriel Schulz's article, "The Semantic Derogation of Woman" (1975). My own work is synchronic and shows the ways in which "sex-neutral" human common nouns are marked by context as male-specific.

9. Our people are the best gamblers in the galaxy.
We compete for power, fame, women.
(Star Trek)

10. For the merry-go-round rider, for example, the self awaiting is one that entails a child's portion of bravery and muscular control, a child's portion of manliness, . . .
(Erving Goffman, Encounters, p. 98)

11. We find that holders of the MA and MS who enter this Department do well in graduate work here. Their application, like those of women, and of members of other minority groups, are welcome.
(Dept. of Psychology flyer, UT-Knoxville)

12. Even in the most serious of roles, such as that of surgeon, we yet find that there will be times when the full-fledged performer must unbend and behave simply as a male.
(Erving Goffman, Encounters, p. 140)

Muriel Schulz's analysis is diachronic and illustrates the ways in which words that are female-specific, e.g., girl, maid, mother, nun, aunt, or that are used with female-specific reference, e.g., hag, crone, witch, nag, bat, acquire meanings in usage that have sexual overtones, and eventually become

pejoratives. (Carl Darling Buck [1949:82]) has also commented on the strange way in which female-specific terms in the Indo-European languages move gradually toward derogation.) Considered together, this synchronic and diachronic work suggests that "meaning," in its many senses, is usage-determined and context-bound, and is therefore more prone to change and to respond to shifts in cultural attitude. Where the cumulative pressure of cultural evaluation is consistent over time, these shifts in meaning must cause semantic change, that is, change in the structure of the language. This hypothesis would account for the semantic asymmetry in verbs like mother and father and pairs of nouns such as lady/lord, mistress/mister, spinster/bachelor, and governess/governor. Once the semantic asymmetry is established as a pattern, other words may then be coined that fit into that semantic structure, e.g., majorette/major, waitress/waiter.

The evidence amassed by those of us who have done research on sexism in English, both diachronic and synchronic, reveals that there is, indeed, a sexist tradition in the English language, and I think it is time for teachers of English to examine their long-held assumptions about the language, and to realign both their thinking and teaching about English in terms of this evidence. It seems to me that our choices are clear and that they are politically defined for us. We can continue to teach patriarchal language and go on pretending that we are ignorant about the ways in which males have changed English to reflect their dominance. Or, we can set about the task of changing the language ourselves, and accept the responsibility for teaching our students uses of language that defy stereotyping and reject the derogation of wimmin now built into the language. We must understand that choosing the

first alternative is assuredly the "safe" position, the condoned version of the history of English, and that it will perpetuate the idea that wimmin are inferior. To choose the second alternative is to choose risk and to return English to the people who speak it, for it means that we can re-create the language to reflect our values. If we live with the first choice, we remain powerless. If we choose instead to restructure our usage, we will have taken power into our own hands, and the responsibilities that accompany it.

Bibliography

Bodine, Ann. 1975. "Androcentrism in Prescriptive Grammar: Singular 'they', Sex-definite 'he', and 'he and she'," Language in Society, 4:129-46.

Buck, Carl Darling. 1949. Dictionary of Selected Synonyms in the Principal Indo-European Languages. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Evans, B., and C. Evans. 1957. A Dictionary of Contemporary American Usage. New York: Random House.

Gershuny, H. Lee. 1974. "Sexist Semantics in the Dictionary," Etc., 31, 2 (June), 159-69.

_____. 1975. "Public Doublespeak: The Dictionary." College English, 36, 8 (April), 938-42.

Nilsen, Alleen Pace. 1973. "The Correlation between Gender and Other Semantic Features in American English," paper delivered to Linguistic Society of America, December, San Diego.

_____. et al., eds. 1977. Sexism and Language. Urbana, Ill.: National Council of Teachers of English.

Schulz, Muriel. 1975. "The Semantic Derogation of Woman," Language and Sex: Difference and Dominance, eds. Barrie Thorne and Nancy Henley. Rowley, Mass.: Newbury House, 64-75.

Stanley, Julia P. 1975. "Prescribed Passivity: The Language of Sexism," Views on Language, eds. Reza Ordoubadian and Walburga von Raffler-Engel. Murfreesboro, Tenn.: Inter-University Publications, 96-108.

_____. 1977a. "Gender-marking in American English," Sexism and Language. See Nilsen, 1977, above.

_____. 1977b. "Paradigmatic Woman: The Prostitute," Papers on Language Variation, eds. David L. Shores and Carole P. Hines. Birmingham, Ala.: University of Alabama Press, 303-21.

_____. 1978. "Sexist Grammar," College English, (March). To appear.

_____, and Susan W. Robbins. 1977. "Sex-marked Predicates in English." Unpublished paper.

_____. 1978. "Going through the Changes: The Pronoun she in Middle English," Papers in Linguistics, 11, 1-2. To appear.